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ABSTRACT

Recent influxes of baby boomers coupled with state reforms reducing student-teacher ratios are stretching the limits on available school facilities across the country. Several aspects of the school facilities issue are covered in question-and-answer format; (1) What is the current status of aging school buildings? (2) What are the financial implications of restoring school facilities? (3) What role should states play? (4) What methods are school districts using to improve the solution? (5) What is a capital improvement plan? and (6) What are some elements to consider when repairing or renovating school facilities? Appended are 10 references. (SI)

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Along with roads and highways, schools are one of the United States' largest infrastructure investments. The nations' 80,000 schools suffer under a $25 billion backlog of repair and would cost nearly $240 billion to replace. To exacerbate the situation, recent influxes of baby boomers coupled with state reforms reducing student-teacher ratios are stretching the limits on available school facilities across the country.

What is the current status of aging school buildings?

Within the next ten years, a large number of shoddily constructed school buildings from the fifties and sixties will need immediate attention. Many of these schools, once expected to survive seventy-five years without major repairs, are in dire need of maintenance overhaul. Because "many districts have failed to maintain their buildings . . . breakdowns are occurring earlier and are more serious" (Montague 1987).

A Council of Great City Schools' report (1985) warns that "without a massive injection of capital improvements, schools in urban districts will continue to deteriorate." One-third of urban schools are more than fifty years old. Where the need increases, the resources dwindle.

What are the financial implications of restoring school facilities?

Thomas Werner noted in 1984 that "the recent economic slump with its concomittant reduction of tax proceeds, has brought most maintenance projects to a halt. Where projects have been approved, money has not been appropriated." According to the Council of Great City Schools, school officials are only spending an average of 3.3 percent of their total budget on maintenance—one half of what they spent four years ago.

Montague refers to a 1983 study showing a 20 percent dip over ten years in the approval rate for bonds, which are the most common source of funds for school maintenance projects. To make matters worse, construction costs have risen faster than the general inflation rate, and, as Montague says, "construction needs must compete for funding with such other reforms as higher teacher salaries."

Most school districts follow a deferred maintenance schedule that often endlessly postpones restoration work. Safety items, however, remain the exception, usually cutting into the established maintenance budget. For instance, asbestos replacement and removal eats up nearly 20 percent of the repair budget in Los Angeles schools. Recent, stricter regulations from the EPA will only increase such percentages.

What role should states play?

More financial support will have to come from the states, authorities say. The National Governor's Association (1988) reports that sixteen states provide no financing for school construction and many others provide only minimal support. This pattern may have to change. As the NGA report states, "the facilities issue is of such magnitude that it can not be left solely to the tradition of local control."

Another important state role, the NGA report says, "is to keep better track of school facilities needs . . . through a statewide inventory system." Each year the state could survey school buildings for maintenance and repair needs, compliance with building codes, handicapped access, asbestos removal, and energy efficiency.

What methods are school districts using to improve the solution?

Many school districts are trying to communicate the seriousness of the problem to their communities in an effort to build understanding and establish credibility. For example, Michigan's Whitmore Lake Public School District asked staff members to help identify problems and needed repairs, solicited recommendations and cost estimates from local trade specialists, and sought the advice of local building experts. The result was improved community relations and broader-based support.

As a method to raise funds for school construction, a 1986 California law authorizes school districts to collect revenue from developers of construction projects within the districts' boundaries. Many districts are also establishing detailed databases that list project costs and priorities. Considering restoration projects as planned maintenance and energy management, rather than deferred maintenance, has lent greater credibility and clarity to restoration programs.

Another funding solution is to lease out available space for government or private use. Ted Schwinden (1986) recommends offering space for quality child-care

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services, currently in high demand. "Schools used for the benefit of the community," he says, "are less prone to vandalism." Also, when people come into the schools for recreational or other activities, they better understand the need for renovation and are more likely to support school bond issues.

What is a capital improvement plan?

Kenneth Ducote (1984), in a proposal for the New Orleans public school system, suggests implementing a capital improvement plan—a practical, comprehensive, and organized approach to capital projects. Capital improvement plans include a detailed inventory of physical assets (complete with a ranking system to differentiate essential, desirable, acceptable, and deferable projects) and include current and projected cost estimates. The plan sets out procedures for conducting financial analysis and indicates channels for restoration requests, methods of accountability, and monitoring criteria. Effective capital improvement plans are coordinated and implemented by a trained, diverse team of specialists, school boards members, the superintendent, school staff members, and the community.

What are some elements to consider when repairing or renovating school facilities?

As Tom Smith (1984) points out, "Facilities should further the academic standards of the school: if they are inadequate or inaccessible, the academic program can not be wholly successful."

Both Public Law 94-142 and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 require that school facilities be made accessible for handicapped children. Renovation should also ensure that facilities are brought up to safety standards.

Energy-conservation should be a major consideration in any renovation process. The Topeka School District has designed a computer program that analyzes energy consumption, helping them cut annual energy costs by 20 percent in one building. Insulation, energy-efficient windows, solar heating, and temperature control are effective energy saving measures. Ted Clark (1984) urges "that all capital improvements, from major maintenance to new construction, contain as much 'state of the art' conservation techniques as money will allow."

Contemporary school design includes features such as movable walls, builtin computer wiring, and ventilation systems that can be altered when rooms are rearranged.

Studies into theories of humanistic architecture, as well as solicitations of suggestions from school members, may offer ways to transform sterile, alienating spaces into rooms agreeable both to students and staff. (In one case, a school district invited students and community members to repaint an old gymnasium.) Broad ownership in the redesign and restoration of a school facility can encourage collective responsibility toward a building and thus prepare for its future preservation.

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